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Speaking and listening: never a better time

by Alison Kelly, David Montgomerie, Kimberly Safford

Las Meninas, detail of the lower half depicting the family of Philip IV (1605-65) of Spain, 1656 (oil on canvas) (detail of 405) by Velasquez, Diego Rodriguez de Silva y (1599-1660) ©Prado, Madrid, Spain/ Giraudon/ The Bridgeman Art Library Nationality / copyright status: Spanish / out of copyright

‘...we try not to laugh. We treat each other with respect.’

Opportunities to develop speaking and listening in the classroom have never been better. *The Rose Review’s* welcome endorsement of a ‘language-rich’ curriculum recognises the status and value of spoken language. The renewed *Primary National Strategy* firmly reinstates talk as a learning medium, with the first four strands of objectives relating to speaking and listening. Oracy is no longer a poor relation to literacy but recognised as the bedrock of children’s learning.

Oracy: why it’s important
In his book *Thought and Language*, psychologist Lev Vygotsky described how thought and language go hand-in-hand. Talk not only shapes *thinking* but is also a window into the child’s mind. When we talk through ideas with each other we move our thinking forward. The National Curriculum places emphasis on the importance of thinking skills – ‘knowing how’ – and it is talk that powers these. Reasoning, enquiry and creative thinking will all flourish in classrooms that value and promote spoken language.

Talk can also promote inclusion, reflecting children’s diverse language communities and experiences. A language-rich curriculum respects and draws upon Standard English, dialects, and languages other than English so that children are enabled to make choices about how, where and when to use language.

Experienced teachers are well-versed in strategies for using talk effectively in the classroom but some basic principles are always worth repeating, considering and developing. What follows is a reminder of some techniques and their rationale, as well as a few specific examples of useful approaches.

Types of talk
As teachers, we know that children can be talkative and classrooms can be chatty places but sometimes we may have concerns about how productive or focussed the children’s talk is. Particular types of talk promote learning. In *Thinking Voices – the work of the National Oracy Project* (1992,) Douglas Barnes suggested two broad categories of talk for learning which teachers have found useful: presentational and exploratory.

Presentational talk is the product, whilst exploratory talk reflects processes of learning. Children use presentational talk when they report back to peers, teachers or the whole school in assemblies; this is a valuable skill. Exploratory talk occurs when children are problem-solving, investigating, developing ideas, drafting. In contrast to presentational talk, exploratory talk is more tentative, less complete and often involves dialogue. Both have their place and teachers can plan for opportunities for each; both offer rich contexts for assessing children’s understanding.

| | |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Exploratory (informal) | Kinds of talk |
| | Making plans |
| | Investigating and solving problems |
| | Raising questions |
| | Working out meanings in texts |
| Preservational (formal) | Reflecting |
| | Rehearsing |
| | Giving explanations |
| | Informing and entertaining others |
| | Reporting and summarising |
| | Interviewing |
| | Telling stories |

Caption copy here, caption copy here.

These talk types are well illustrated in the familiar ‘jigsaw’ technique which can be used in any curriculum area. In the following example, Year 5 pupils have been reading Philip Pullman’s short novel *The Firework Maker’s Daughter*; they have been set a group task of creating a poster introducing the main characters which they will present to a Year 4 class who are about to begin reading the book. Initially, the children are placed in initial ‘home’ groups of four and each is allocated a character: Lila, Chulak, Lalchand and Rambashi. These groups are then disbanded in favour of ‘expert’ groups, each of which will look at one character. Using prompt sheets provided by the teacher, the children discuss and make notes in readiness for reporting back to their home group. So, the group focusing on Lila are asked to decide on three adjectives which best describe her. One child’s suggestion of ‘wilful’ is hotly disputed by the others in the group and they finally settle upon ‘determined’, ‘brave’ and ‘clever’. This exploratory talk gives way to more formal presentational talk when the experts report back to the home group and when the final presentations are made to the Year 4 class.

Teaching talk: getting started Create ‘Ground Rules’

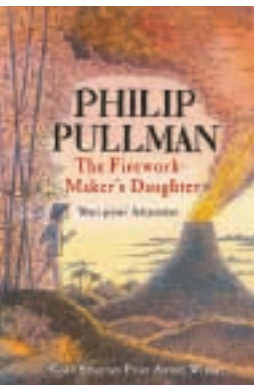
If you feel a bit unsure about how to begin creating a speaking and listening classroom, it is useful to establish ‘ground rules’ for talk with the children. Get their ideas about what they value in a listener, and how they would like to be able to speak to the whole class, in a small group or in a paired situation. You can brainstorm these guidelines together, and these can then be posted around the classroom or laminated on A4 cards for group work. Ground rules for talk are useful in re-focusing children if you feel discussions are not productive, and children enjoy the responsibility of managing their own talk (and disputes!) by referring to the rules. Here are some examples which were developed by two KS2 classes:

- We take turns to speak
- We listen to each other
- We look at the person talking
- We respect each other and are polite
- We ask questions to encourage and to show we have listened
- If someone says something wrong or makes a mistake, we try not to laugh. We treat each other with respect
- We may disagree at times but explain why in a polite way
- We think before we ask questions or express an opinion
- We can try to reach an agreement
- We try not to interrupt because it distracts their ideas, flow and concentration

Use your toolkit
In *The Guided Construction of Knowledge* (2000), Neil Mercer identified useful teaching techniques which enable children to become effective and reflective speakers and listeners. He called these ‘the teacher’s toolkit’ for talk, observing that when teachers continually rephrase and respond to children’s oral language, children emulate the teacher’s higher-level model of talk. The teacher’s toolkit involves responding to what children say and describing the shared classroom experience through a range of oral techniques:

- Confirmations: ‘Yes, that’s right...’
- Repetitions: ‘You’ve told us that “the ice-cap melted gradually”...’
- Reformulations: ‘Over millions of years, the ice-cap diminished...’
- Elaborations: ‘Many scientists hypothesise that global warming is responsible for this...’
- ‘We’ statements: ‘We’ve researched some evidence for this...’

Sharpen up your questioning skills
Knowledge of the range of question types provides a powerful tool for personalised learning and ensuring that all children can be drawn into class and group discussions. In this example, a group of teachers considered how a great work of art – such as Velasquez’s *Las Merinas* –could be used to generate different types of questions. There are opportunities for literal, closed questions ▶



‘Talk ... is a window into the child’s mind.’



‘...just what purposes might pigs serve?’



(‘How many people are in the picture?’); for inferential questions (‘Who do you think is the most important person in the picture?’) and for deductive ones (‘Is this a rich or a poor household?’). The latter could be extended to include evaluative (‘Why do you think that...?’).

Create contexts for talk

Opportunities for talk are opportunities for active learning and children need repeated experiences to practise speaking and listening. Incorporate talk into your planning, enabling children to talk in pairs and in groups, in a range of curriculum areas. These moments can be as brief as one minute (‘talk to the person next to you – what do you think will happen next?’) and as long as a piece of string (‘discuss in your groups until you agree how the story should end.’). You can observe how such activities invite children to use exploratory language and justify their reasons, using phrases such as ‘*I think...because...so that...*’ and what this reveals about their thinking and understanding. Such opportunities can involve problem-solving, collaborative drafting and writing, experimenting, designing and crafting. Children also need to have a clear understanding of why they are talking, for example, to solve a puzzle, to create an image, to arrive at a conclusion, or to communicate to an audience.

Drama

Process drama can offer powerful contexts for developing children’s spoken language. A particular effective approach is based on the work of Dorothy Heathcote, Gavin Bolton and Cecily O’Neill (see *Drama for Learning* by D. Heathcote and G. Bolton) and involves the teacher working in role alongside children. When a teacher assumes a role she can model, channel and extend language in a range of fictitious drama contexts. Such an approach can afford children the opportunity to reason, challenge, persuade and negotiate in role.

For example, Waddell and Oxenbury’s multi-layered picture book *Farmer Duck* draws on aspects of Orwell’s classic *Animal Farm* and has potential for use in a Nursery or a Year Six Class. The plot presents the unfair treatment of animals and the

eventual displacement of the original farmer. However, drama allows you to explore situations with children before, during and after those presented in the story. Here are some possibilities.

- 1. Go into role with the children as the unfairly treated animals. In this situation you may choose to discuss plans, reason with the powerful farmer, or persuade others to take the dangerous course of revolutionary action and be prepared to justify such action to others.
- 2. Take on the role of the farmer and argue against attempts at negotiation by the animals.
- 3. Choose to go sideways into the story and assume the roles of neighbouring farmers/animals reacting to the news of the farmer’s eviction
- 4. Go forwards in time to consider the problems of farm management by the victorious animals. While animals such as cows have an obvious economic contribution to make – just what purposes might pigs serve?

As these dramatic situations develop, the language in use serves different purposes. Note the following example where a reception child has taken on the role of the farmer’s mother. She has abdicated her responsibilities for his behaviour and is attempting to persuade a hostile audience that the unhealthy diet she provided for him as a child was justified.

| | |
|---------|--|
| Anna | (Spoken with an air of resignation and in persuasive tone) I couldn’t bear to have him whining at me after dinner so I just had to give him it. |
| Teacher | Does he whine a lot? ...When your son whines you let him have what he wants? |
| Anna | If they whined a lot of times...well I don’t want a whiner at dinner ...because then it would be a really waste what you have just cooked for them and that. So you just have to give him what they have... or otherwise you waste it. |

In every dramatic situation, there is the need for talking for a range of social purposes. Children are used to this demand from their early play experiences. You have only to observe a themed home corner such as a hospital to hear children complaining, diagnosing, reassuring and prescribing. Drama capitalises on these early play experiences and enables teachers of children at any age to focus and extend the use of talk in the classroom. Such talk can provide authentic pathways and reasons for a range of writing (for example, in the example above, the children could go on to write healthy recipes and shopping lists for the mother and her farmer son).

In conclusion, it is important that children themselves have opportunities to reflect on the value of talk . This Year 5 boy commented on how talk helps him to think: ‘I get to understand their ideas as well as mine, so I can get a mixture of both ideas, instead of just having mine.’ ■
(‘Boys on the margin’ by Safford et al, 2004)

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